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(Pennsylvania Historical Reprints)

Reprinted from PENNSYLVANIA HISTORY, Quarterly Journal of the Pennsylvania Historical Association, Vol. XIX, No. 2, April, 1952, for the

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PHILADELPHIA'S EXPEDITIONS TO LABRADOR

BY BERTHA SOLIS-COHEN

PHILADELPHIA in the middle years of the eighteenth century was one of the centers of the theorizing, observation, and discovery through which men sought to extend the bounds of knowledge, in what has been called the Age of Enlightenment. The botanizing of John Bartram, the optical and astronomical work of David Rittenhouse, and the electrical experiments of Benjamin Franklin are well known aspects of this intellectual and scientific ferment, which found institutional expression in the American Philosophical Society. Less well known perhaps is the fact that the interests of Philadelphians extended also to geographical discovery and exploration. The very year when Benjamin Franklin performed his famous kite experiment, snatching lightning from the clouds to prove its electrical nature, found him actively engaged in a venture to discover the Northwest Passage and explore the arctic regions of Labrador.

For many years arctic explorations had been of interest to Benjamin Franklin and his intimates in Philadelphia. They had accumulated many books, pamphlets and maps on the subject, first at the Junto, and later at the Library Company. It was believed that somewhere in the northern part of the western hemisphere there was a Northwest Passage, connecting the Atlantic with the Pacific Ocean. This waterway was thought to be a shorter, cheaper, and less dangerous route to Japan, China, and the Indies.

In the 16th and 17th centuries, rumors that the Spanish and Portuguese had suppressed accounts of its navigation inspired many attempts to locate it, by men of various nations. In 1741 Russians searched for the "supposed" Northwest Passage of 1640 from the Pacific Ocean, by way of rivers and lakes, to the Arctic Ocean near Hudson Bay, where Admiral de Fonte checked Northwest Passage explorations of a ship from Boston, on the Atlantic coast. English navigators were trying to locate the Hudson Bay entrance used by Shapley and Gibbons, of New England. In 1745,

Parliament offered an award of 20,000 pounds for British discovery of the Northwest Passage from Hudson Bay, and a new expedition sailed the following year. Returning in 1747, the explorers reported that two openings were not completely explored, and it was thought that if exploration were pushed to completion on a subsequent voyage, the Northwest Passage would probably be discovered and navigated, opening up the northern trade route to Asia.

Benjamin Franklin was receiving from London all the printed matter on arctic exploration and on the hypothesis of a Northwest Passage, and, soon after they were published, two accounts of these latest explorations were in his hands. The anonymous one was by Charles Swaine, Clerk of the ship *California* on that voyage.¹ Anxious to complete the discovery, Swaine came to Maryland to seek financial backing. Governor Ogle of Maryland was convinced by his arguments, and in November, 1750, gave Swaine a document or passport permitting him to make the search.² Swaine also gained the interest and support of the great Philadelphian, Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin and his Northwest Committee backed Swaine's proposals for opening trade with the East Indies. This committee included William Allen, William Coleman, Samuel McCall, Sr., John Mifflin, John Stamper, and Charles Stedman, as well as Franklin himself.³ In the event that the Northwest Passage was not located in Hudson Bay, Swaine was to explore the Labrador coast, and to determine the possibilities for fishing, whaling, and fur trading there. In those days the name Labrador was applied to the entire peninsula, although it was not yet known whether the land was part of the mainland, or an island. While England and France were disputing ownership of Labrador, it was considered open to all.

To raise money for their expedition, the Northwest Committee organized the Northwest Company, and sought subscriptions from men in various colonies. Among the subscribers who knew all

¹ [Charles Swaine], *An Account of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage. . . . By the Clerk of the California*. London, 1748 and 1749. Bertha Solis-Cohen, Authorship notes, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 4th Quarter, 1943: 308.

² Ogle document. Photostat, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

³ Petition of the Merchants of Philadelphia and North America, Nov., 1752. Public Record Office, London. Photostat, American Philosophical Society.

about Swaine's plans was the Rev. James Sterling, of Kent County, Maryland. Sterling had plantations in Maryland, and—although Maryland clergymen were not supposed to engage in business—he was interested in it, as well as in other secular matters, for he was a minor poet and playwright. He had already written a very long poem on the British Empire in America, entitled *An Epistle to the Hon. Arthur Dobbs, Esq.* Dobbs was the well-known British promoter of Northwest Passage exploration and of the extension of the British Empire in the New World.

The Rev. James Sterling was in the British Isles in 1752, when three parts of his poem were published in Dublin and London, and he applied for the collectorship of customs at the ports of Chester and Patapsco.⁴ Although he was a subscriber to Franklin's scheme involving the Northwest Passage and free British trade at Labrador, Sterling now formed other connections. He convinced some London merchants and men of affairs that there were great trading possibilities on the Labrador coast, and they applied for a 99-year monopoly grant for that region. Among these merchants were John Hanbury, who traded with Virginia and was London agent and member of the Ohio Company; and John Thomlinson, who traded with New England, was London agent for the New Hampshire colony, and had been on the 1746 Northwest Committee of London, with Arthur Dobbs.

On April 16, 1752, Thomlinson, Hanbury, Sterling, Touchet, Thrale and others had a hearing before the Board of Trade and Plantations, with George Dunk, Earl of Halifax, as President, and James Grenville, Francis Fane, James Oswald, and Charles Townsend as other members present. Sterling introduced the proposal for opening trade at Labrador, and said that he and his fellow petitioners humbly hoped for the sanction and assistance of the Board. This Samuel Touchet made more specific by stating that they desired "a grant for an exclusive trade upon that coast."⁵

Sterling contended that Labrador belonged to Great Britain, indisputably, and that a very valuable trade might be developed there in furs, whale fins, whale bone, fish and masts. According to him,

⁴ Lawrence C. Wroth, "James Sterling," *Dictionary of American Biography*; Wroth, "James Sterling, Poet, Priest and Prophet of Empire," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings*, April, 1931: 25-76.

⁵ Journal of the Commissioners for Trade and Plantations MS. copy: 60: 166 ff. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

the "Eskimaux Indians" inhabiting that country were perpetually at war with the Canadian and other French Indians. By employing the natives, the merchants could soon put a stop to any invasion of their settlements by French Indians. When asked if he had ever heard of any English going to the Labrador coast, Sterling replied that a Captain Wilson had been there some years before, and that he himself had been there since that time. Sterling found the natives shy and unwilling to trade; they had urged the English, in sign language, to go away. He was asked if he had ever heard that the Hudson's Bay Company had a claim to this coast, and Sterling said he had not, although he knew that such an opinion was current and that settlements were discouraged. In any case, it was not mentioned in the Company's charter.

The petitioners were asked to explain more fully the nature of the grant for which they were applying. Thomlinson remarked that he thought all they had to do was to ask if the Board had any objections to their soliciting the grant. The Board was told that the request was for an exclusive grant of the whole coast of Labrador from the Strait of Belle Isle to Hudson Strait, "with a reservation of the right of his Majesty's other subjects or any foreign power which should be in actual possession at this time as is customary with such grants."

The men were asked to retire while the Board considered their request. Afterward, the Board informed them that it could have no objection, from a commercial point of view, to their application for permission to open such an important and valuable tract. However, many inconveniences had resulted from grants of exclusive rights, particularly in the case of The Hudson's Bay Company, and it was doubtful if such a difficulty could be overcome. While disavowing any suspicion that these gentlemen would make ill use of such a grant, the Board said that a more limited grant would be less liable to objections than an exclusive one. The petitioners then agreed to consider suitable limitations, and withdrew.

The men discussed the situation and decided to reduce the time of the trade monopoly requested from 99 to 63 years. Their Petition, formally addressed to the Lords Justices in Council, for opening trade at Labrador was drawn up. It was signed on April 23 by John Thomlinson, John Hanbury, Samuel Touchet, James

Buchanan, Thomas Diniley, Henry Thrale and John Buchanan, and presented to the Board on the same day.

The Board of Trade and Plantations, however, had the same objection to an exclusive grant, on the grounds that few cases justified it. It doubted that the Crown would grant the request, but the men were given permission to make the application. Hanbury still thought that a 99-year term was more likely to be executed effectively and to the public advantage, observing that land was not their object. Such a grant could not be prejudicial to The Hudson's Bay Company, except by introducing a great quantity of furs. The Board stated that the Company entered into the matter only in case it made any claim of territory or of any other right. If such claim were made, the Board would consider it later.

When the Board met on May 12, a letter was read from Mr. Amyard, secretary of the Lords Justices, referring the petition in which several merchants of London prayed "that a charter of incorporation for themselves and their associates, and a grant may be made to them of all that tract in North America called Labrador or New Britain, and that they may have an exclusive right of trading thither for the term of sixty-three years." The petition was enclosed with the letter.

On the same day, Sterling's request for a collectorship of customs was granted. It carried a yearly salary of eighty pounds, and permission to keep a boat, like the collectors of "North Potomack and Pocomak." Sterling also received passage money home, which he had requested from the Bishop of London.⁶

It was not until June 10 that the Board of Trade considered Amyard's letter, and then it merely ordered the drafting of a statement on the Crown's right to Labrador. A month later, it discussed the petition again, and decided to consider it on July 14. The Board's secretary was directed to notify the petitioners to attend the meeting, and to address an inquiry to the governor and committee of The Hudson's Bay Company asking if they had any right or claim involving Labrador.⁷ Sterling did not wait for the decision, but sailed for home.

At the meeting on July 14, the governor and deputy-governor of The Hudson's Bay Company appeared with excuses. They had

⁶ See note 4.

⁷ See note 5.

not had time to summon the committee, and were not themselves authorized to report on the important question under consideration. The matter would be laid before the committee as soon as it could meet, in order to give the Board a full and satisfactory answer.

The merchants and other persons interested in the Labrador monopoly were then called before the Board, and, after their petition was read, were given a hearing. Two days later, the Board considered the Labrador petition, and "made some progress." The next day, The Hudson's Bay Company's *Memorial*, dated July 20, was presented, read, and considered. The Company claimed that Labrador, from 60° N to 52° N, was considered within their limits. Already ten thousand pounds had been spent there, on the Hudson Bay coast, and the land was said to be barren, with few beavers or other valuable fur-bearing animals. The *Memorial* suggested that the London merchants wanted to gain a foothold and then draw off the trade of the Company; therefore, the Company hoped that the petition would not be granted.⁸

The Board of Trade considered the Petition of the London merchants, and ordered that a "Draught of a representation thereupon to their Excellencies the Lords Justices" be prepared. The transcription of the draught was signed on the 23rd.

A secret attempt to open the Labrador trade occurred that year. The firm of Bell, Nesbitt & Co. (or Nisbet, Grace & Bell) outfitted a ship for exploration and trading at Labrador, and four Moravian Brethren, who were not to engage in trade, accompanied the expedition in order to open a Moravian mission on the coast. One of the Moravians was Christian Frederick Post, a Pennsylvanian noted for his success in dealing with the Indians. John Christian Erhardt, the vice-captain, interpreter and agent, had urged such a mission for some years.

After the mission was built, the ship left the Brethren there, and started off on the more practical aspects of its voyage. At some point on the coast, natives came to the ship to arrange for trading, and the captain and some of his men went off with them. The others waited as long as possible, but the trading party did not return. The mate, Elijah Goff, assumed command and, since he was

⁸ W. G. Gosling, *Labrador: Its Discovery, Exploration and Development* (Toronto, 1911), 130.

now short-handed, the Moravians had to return to help get the vessel back to England.⁹

That same summer, a Captain John Taylor was in Philadelphia, between voyages to England, and learned of the plans for the expedition from Philadelphia. At this time, Charles Swaine was in New England, where he did some investigation for Benjamin Franklin. According to the published account of Admiral de Fonte, which some claimed to be a forgery, the Northwest Passage was navigated in 1640, when the ship from Boston, Massachusetts, was met and halted by Spaniards from Lima, Peru. Franklin wanted to authenticate this tale of a Boston expedition. Swaine was unable to document it, but the information he brought back was convincing to him and Franklin.¹⁰

Franklin's Northwest Company had raised fifteen hundred pounds before winter.¹¹ Whalemens were engaged for the spring, and navigators, too; the schooner *Argo* was purchased, and arrangements were made to outfit her. Everything looked propitious, when the blow fell: they received the shocking news of the application for a monopoly grant for the Labrador trade. Sterling had even proposed that Charles Swaine conduct the expedition for the London merchants, and accept the position of factor, or governor, of one of the posts to be established in Labrador. Swaine, however, rejected this offer.¹²

To learn of the rival plans for the promotion of trade and exploration in Labrador was most upsetting to Franklin and his associates, and especially so since one of their own subscribers was behind the competing proposal. The unhappy situation was discussed. At that time, as in every age, the way to delay action, if not to prevent it, was to present a counter-proposal. This may have been the reason for the decision they reached. They would petition the Crown to refuse the monopoly grant, and at the same time they would proceed as planned.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 252; [Charles Swaine], *The Great Probability of a North West Passage* (London, 1768), 142-145; Bertha Solis-Cohen, Authorship notes, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 4th Quarter, 1945: 319-320.
¹⁰ [Swaine], *Great Probability*, 65 ff.

¹¹ Franklin to Cadwallader Colden, Feb. 28, 1753, New-York Historical Society, published in *The Letters and Papers of Cadwallader Colden*, New-York Historical Society Collections, 1920; J. E. Nourse, *American Explorations in the Ice Zones* (1884).

¹² Allen to Penn, Nov. 18, 1752. Penn Correspondence, Private, VI, 93, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

Sunday last arriv'd here the Schooner *Argo*, Captain Charles Swaine, who sail'd from this Port last Spring on the Discovery of a North-west Passage. She fell in with the Ice off of Farewell; left the Eastern Ice, and fell in with the Western Ice in Lat. 58. and cruiz'd to the Northward to Lat. 63. to clear it, but could not, it then extending to the Eastward. On her Return to the Southward, she met with two Danish Ships bound to Ball River and Disco up Davis's Straits, who had been in the Ice fourteen Days off Farewell, and had then stood to Westward, and assured the Commander that the Ice was fast to the Shore all above Hudson's Straits to the Distance of 40 Leagues out, and that there had not been such a severe Winter as the last these 24 Years that they had used that Trade; they had been 9 Weeks from Copenhagen. The *Argo* finding she could not get round the Ice, press'd thro' it, and got into the Straits Mouth the 26th of June, and made the Island Resolution, but was forc'd out by vast Quantities of driving Ice, and got into a clear Sea the first of July. On the 14th, cruising the Ice for an Opening to get in again, she met 4 Sail of Hudson's Bay Ships, endeavouring to get in, and continued with them till the 19th, when they parted in thick Weather in Lat. 62 and a Half; which thick Weather continued to the 7th of August; the Hudson's Bay-men supposed themselves 40 Leagues from the western Land. The *Argo* ran down the Ice from 63 to 57, 30. and, after repeated Attempts to enter the Straits in vain, as the Season for Discovery on the Western Side of the Bay was over, she went on the Labrador Coast, and discover'd it perfectly from 56 to 55, finding no less than 6 Inlets, to the Heads of all which they went, and of which we hear they have made a very good Chart, and have a better Account of the Country, its Soil, Produce, &c. than has hitherto been published. The Captain says 'tis much like Norway; and that there is no Communication with Hudson's Bay thro' Labrador where one has been heretofore imagined, a high Ridge of mountains running North and South about 50 Leagues within the Coast. In one of the Harbours they found a deserted Wooden House with a Brick Chimney, which had been built by some English, as appear'd by sundry Things they left behind; and afterwards in another Harbour they met with Capt. Goff in a Snow from London, who inform'd, that the same Snow had been there last Year, and landed some of the Moravian Brethren, who had built that House: But the Natives having decoy'd the then Captain of the Snow, and 5 or 6 of his Hands in their Boat round a Point of Land at a Distance from the Snow, under Pretence of Trade, and carry'd them all off (they having gone imprudently without Arms) the Snow, after waiting 16 Days without hearing of them, went home, and was oblig'd to take away the Moravians to help to work the Vessel. Part of her Business this Year was to enquire after those Men. Captain Swaine discover'd a fine Fishing Bank, which lies but 6 Leagues off the Coast, and extends from Lat. 57, to 54, supposed to be the same hinted at in Capt. Davis's second Voyage. No bad Accident happen'd to the Vessel, and the Men kept in perfect Health during the whole Voyage, and return'd ail well.

From *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Nov. 15, 1753

The Philadelphia Northwest Passage Expedition

On November 18, William Allen wrote an explanatory letter to the Proprietor, Thomas Penn, who was his good friend, and asked him to present the petition of the merchants of Philadelphia. "As I am assured that everything that regards the interest and reputation of the province of Pennsylvania will ever be regarded by you," he said, "I therefore beg leave to Solicite your favour in behalf of myself and many other of the merchants of this place." Allen explained how they had come to undertake their "noble design," even though repeated attempts to discover the Northwest Passage from England had been unsuccessful. He assured Penn that success in this venture would "redound to the honor" of his province and the advantage of those undertaking it. An examination of the enclosed papers would show why their project had been delayed, but a vessel and all other supplies were bought and arrangements made, and the ship was to sail the latter part of March.

By avoiding the mistakes of earlier attempts, and by pursuing what they considered a better method, they hoped to effect the discovery of a Northwest Passage, or at least prove that there was none. If unsuccessful, Allen wrote, they might start a lucrative trade on the coast of Labrador. Now, to their great surprise, they were informed that they were likely to lose that proposed trade

by means of a scoundrell of a parson one James Sterling who last summer took his passage to London and there represented the advantage of the trade to the Labrador coast in such a light to Messr. Glowbury Buchanan and others that it is said they have applied to the crown for an exclusive patent.

This same Sterling who is a church of England Minister at Newtown in Maryland was concerned with us originally in the undertaking and subscribed to bear a part of the expence but after he had by frequent conversations extracted from the person we chiefly depend upon for executing the design all or chief part of the intelligence that he could give he has been base enough to endeavour to inconvenient us.

Allen also told of Sterling's proposals to Swaine, the commander of the expedition, and explained the enclosures. He complained that, although Sterling was a parson, he was given a collectorship of customs. Considering themselves very ill-used by this false brother, they were sending a petition to the King. They were

humbly submitting it to Penn's consideration, and if he judged it was for their good, requested him to see that the grant was prevented. They would take care of any expense which this might involve. The kind offices of Penn would confer "a very great obligation on many of the most considerable merchants of this place."¹³

Sterling's letter to Franklin was enclosed, as well as the subscription list, which had Sterling's signature as subscriber. The letter and the list are among the missing Frankliniana, but the undated petition which Penn presented is in the Public Record Office in London :

To the Kings most Excellent Majesty

The Petition or Memorial of the Merchants of Philadelphia and North America against a Patent applied for by certain Merchants of London for an exclusive right of Trade to New Britain or Labrador—

In most humble manner shews

That it being apparent, that New Britain or Labrador, is not within the Limits of the Hudsons Bay Companys Charter, a Design hath been formed by Pet^{rs} & other Merchants in North America, to improve, & carry, the Trade to New Britain, into a compleat Execution; The Design was formed, in the latter part of the Year One Thousand Seven hundred and Fifty Two, but, from the extream hard Winter, and uncommon, long Continuance of the Severe Weather it was thought impracticable, to make suitable Preparations, and fit out, time enough to accomplish their Designs, that Season, therefore, they deferred it, untill the Spring One Thousand Seven hundred and Fifty three, not apprehensive that this delay, which necessity obliged them to, shou'd make them liable to be Supplanted, in such their laudable Design, as they must be, if the said patent, for an exclusive right to Trade to those Parts, is granted.—

That such Patent was never proposed to be applied for, or the Trade thought of, by those, who now make Application for the said Patent, until some time after Your Petrs had formed, & made some Progress, in such their Scheme of carrying this Trade into Execution, as above said: & until those Gentlemen were let into your Parts, to whom the same had been well Communicated in Confidence, & who pretended to be a zealous Promoter thereof here, and well knew, that a Considerable Sum of Money was

¹³ See note 12.

Subscribing (which is now actually Subscribed) and due Preparations making, by Your Petitioners, for entering upon the said Proposed Trade, and Other Discoverys of the utmost Importance, this next ensuing Spring: and which Trade, to all Your Majestys Subjects, & not to apply for a Monopoly, or exclusive right of Trade, for themselves, against others.—¹⁴

Thomas Penn received the letter and its enclosures on December 15. He learned that the applicants for the Labrador trade monopoly had requested consideration of their case at the meeting of the King's General Council to be held on the 17th. Penn called at the Board of Trade on the morning of the 16th, and found out that the application for the monopoly grant had been examined and a report returned. Penn's next move was to call on Lord Halifax, and inform him of the contents of the Philadelphia merchants' petition, which Penn intended to present to the Council the following day. Halifax assured him that the petition would be considered thoroughly, as the Board of Trade would be inclined to encourage such an undertaking. The Board doubted the wisdom of granting an exclusive right for trade, as the result might be that the applicants would acquire territorial claims.

At Lord Halifax's, Penn saw John Hanbury and told him about the petition from America and the part Sterling had played. Hanbury was indifferent about the grant, as his private interest was very little concerned, he said, and he felt that Sterling had deceived them.

Penn presented the Petition from North America to the General Council in December 17, and it was referred to a committee. On the 21st, the committee referred it to the Lords Commissioners for Trade and Plantations (the Board of Trade), who were to make a report to the committee.

On January 11, 1753, Penn wrote Allen about what he had done, and that he had entered complaints with the attorney general and the solicitor general against the passing of any monopoly grant. He had great reason to believe that none would be passed to interfere with their plans. A grant could not be passed, he explained, before these officials were heard for or against it. As it was absolutely necessary to have a solicitor, he was going to employ Mr. Paris:

¹⁴ Photostat, American Philosophical Society.

the expense would not be considerable, he thought. He also commented that Sterling was in trouble: Lord Baltimore's friends were using their influence to have Sterling removed from his collectorship, and to have Mr. Calvert restored. In closing his letter, Penn wrote:

I heartily wish you success in this undertaking, and desire you will acquaint the Gentlemen concerned that it gives me great pleasure to assist them on this occasion.
I am

Your very affectionate Friend
T. P.¹⁵

On January 16, the Board of Trade met, with Pitt, Dupplin, Fane and Townsend sitting with Halifax, and the secretary read the order of December 21 which referred the Petition of the merchants of Philadelphia and North America to the Board's consideration. There was no discussion after the reading. Two weeks later, Penn added a note to his letter to Allen, which had not yet been sent: "Since writing the above there has not been any further application on either side."

Later, Sir Dudley Ryder, Attorney-General, and Sir William Murray, Solicitor-General, drew up a long and impressive report reviewing the Memorial of The Hudson's Bay Company. They concluded that, for all practical purposes, the Company's claims were valid.¹⁶ Permission for a monopoly trade at Labrador was denied by the Council.

The attempt to remove Sterling from his collectorship failed, however. A petition from merchants and masters in the Maryland trade asking that Sterling's appointment be vacated, was received in February and read in March at a meeting of the Lords of the Treasury. The Treasury Board took no action, and Sterling held the post until his death.

Peter Collinson, the London merchant who had been the recipient of Franklin's famous letters on his electrical experiments, heard of the plans for attempting to reach the East Indies through

¹⁵ Penn Letter Books, III, 202, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

¹⁶ Gosling, *Labrador*, 130; Beckles Willson, *The Great Company* (London, 1900), 278n.

the Northwest Passage, and wrote to Franklin on January 27, 1753:

Your Laudable publick Spirit is ever Exerting itself for the good of the Community I heartily Wish you Success on yr Expedition for the Benefit of Trade for there is no hopes of a North west passage if I may Credit a Mapp lately published by the French in which they have laid down all the Coast from California to above the Arctic Circle They make indeed a River from about Hudsons bay Derived from a Great Island lake full of Islands and another river falling from that lake into the Eastern Ocean above California—as soone as this Mapp is published Here which is soone-expected I will send one—¹⁷

Collinson had evidently examined the new French map in support of de Fonte's voyage of 1640, but either it was not clear to him that de Fonte was said to have used rivers and lakes in his Northwest Passage, or else he accepted the improbability of such a lake-and-river system. His letter continued:

There is a Sett of Opulent Merchants have been projecting a Scheme for Carrying on a Trade to the Labrador Coast & have laid It before the Board of Trade who approvd their Scheme and as it will be attended with a great Expençe they Desire a charter for 20 or 30 years.—the Maryland Parson has Sett this project on foot He is Volatile Blade & Great Poet—But this affair for the present is at a Stand. your petition no doubt, but will have its Effect—for all Trade ought to be Open & Free to all Our Kings Subjects. . . . I expect Mr Jackson every Evening to Call on me & then I will give him yr respects.¹⁸

Writing to John Bartram in the middle of February, Collinson further commented on the expedition:

I much suspect our Frd Swain is too precipitate and recons to fast—I would wish to know in what part of Hudson Bay he Intends to push his discovery, that is Easily pointed out on the Maps to the Voyage of Middleton, Smith and Dobs's Maps &C If we may depend on their accounts there is very little left undiscribed for him to

¹⁷ Franklin Papers, 69:58, American Philosophical Society.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

make the Experiment on— If He can Settle a Trade with the Remote Indies it may be more for his private Interest & that of his owners.¹⁹

On March 4, 1753, the Port of Philadelphia was the scene of departure of the new expedition for the discovery of the Northwest Passage, as Captain Charles Swaine set out in the *Argo*. He was to stop at Hyannis, on Cape Cod, and at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for whalemens, whaleboats, and some equipment. Captain Swaine was detained at Portsmouth for two weeks for the repair of a leaky whaleboat, but the schooner sailed away on April 15, with all on board in good health and high spirits.²⁰

On May 3, Richard Peters wrote Penn, giving some details of the expedition. He said that Swaine had been furnished with everything he wanted. When Swaine left, he felt assured that the expedition would make the names of the subscribers and the port from which he departed famous throughout the ages. Peters also told Penn that William Allen was delighted at Penn's zealousness for the freedom and independence of trade on the Labrador coast.²¹

There were at least two other expeditions on the Labrador coast that year, besides the expedition from Philadelphia sponsored by Franklin and his friends.²² Captain Elijah Goff returned to trade and to search for the missing men, who had been lost the previous year. According to his orders from the London merchant, Claude Nesbitt, Goff was to take possession of the land, and the plaque which was erected bore the names of Goff and John Bell. Another expedition headed by Captain John Taylor, who had orders to explore Labrador and search for the Northwest Passage, was encountered by Goff. Taylor was outfitted in Rhode Island, but all attempts to locate his backers have been unsuccessful. The Hudson's Bay Company's captains knew about Taylor's Expedition, and when they met the *Argo*, expected to find Taylor with Swaine. On the other hand, Taylor informed Goff of the expedition from Philadelphia headed by Swaine.

Meanwhile, the *Argo* of Philadelphia made many attempts to penetrate the ice and pass through Hudson Strait in time for exploration in Hudson Bay, but was unsuccessful in every attempt.

¹⁹ Bartram Papers, III, 89, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 10, 1753; *Boston Gazette*, May 22, 1753.

²¹ Penn Papers, Official, VI, 51, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

²² [Swaine], *Great Probability*, 142-145.

Swaine met a Danish ship trying to reach the western coast of Greenland, and ships of The Hudson's Bay Company trying to navigate the ice-clogged strait. He then explored and mapped part of the Labrador coast, finding the ruins of the Moravian mission. In the course of this exploration, he met Goff and was told of Taylor's expedition. Finally, after sounding much of the vast Labrador fishing bank, Swaine headed for home, sailing back up the Delaware on November 11, 1753, with his journals of the expedition and charts of the discoveries in the region of Labrador. An account of the voyage was published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on November 15, and reprinted in the colonies and in England.

On December 6, Benjamin Franklin wrote to Richard Jackson, another friend in England, on the outcome of the venture:

Our Vessel fitted out for the Discovery of a Northwest Passage, is return'd without entering Hudson's Bay, being prevented by unusual Quantities of Ice. She has, however, made some Discoveries of the Harbours on the Labrador Coast, that may be useful; and I believe we shall fit her out again in the Spring for a second Attempt. We are oblig'd to you for your good Wishes, but more for giving us your Opinion concerning the Force of the Hudsons Bay Charter, with regard to Trade in the Bay.²³

Collinson undoubtedly saw this letter, for he and Jackson shared Franklin's correspondence. In the latter part of January, Collinson wrote Franklin, "Many Well Wishers Here to Capt Swains Expedition are Concern'd He had no better Success—yet his Journals & Discoveries, may be well worth our Knowledge." Collinson suggested that Swaine's new data should be compared with the maps Franklin already had, and with a map of French discoveries which he was sending to him.²⁴

Franklin's second venture, in 1754, was a failure, because of an unexpected mishap. After Swaine's vessel had reached the Labrador coast, a party of three men who had been sent out exploring were killed by the natives, and their boat captured. Swaine learned with surprise that, before sailing from Philadelphia, these men had received secret instructions "at the Instigation of a private Person"

²³ Carl Van Doren, *Letters and Papers of Benjamin Franklin and Richard Jackson* (Philadelphia, 1947), 40-41

²⁴ Franklin Papers, 69:56, American Philosophical Society.

and "without the Privity of the Commander," to look for a mine from which specimens had been carried back the previous year. Consequently, they had gone farther than Swaine had ordered, and had met with disaster. In somewhat veiled language, the preface to *The Great Probability of a North West Passage* continues:

After which Accident, with some disagreeable Circumstances consequent thereon amongst the Schooner's Company, and after an Experiment made of their Disinclination to proceed on any further Discovery, it was thought most prudent to return.

It would thus seem that the second expedition came to an end because of a threatened mutiny.²⁵

Perhaps because of their lack of success, these two ventures to locate the Northwest Passage to the Indies went unmentioned in Franklin's autobiography. His own omission may account for the fact that few writers have mentioned his organization of the Northwest Company and the Philadelphia ventures in arctic exploration which he helped to promote. Franklin's attempt to open trade with Labrador, and possibly with the East Indies, deserves attention. It is certainly of significance that eighteenth century Philadelphia, as the second city of the British Empire, shared in the impulse for exploration and discovery which characterized the great age of Captain Cook and Captain Bligh; and that its leading intellectual figure and its leading merchants gave support to the enterprise, with the blessing of the Proprietor, Thomas Penn.

²⁵ [Swaine], *Great Probability*, xi-xii; also, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Oct. 24, 1754; *Pennsylvania Journal*, Oct. 24, 1754; Robert Levers to William Parsons, Oct. 1754, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

